

ARTICLE APPEARED
 Pg. 7

LOS ANGELES TIMES
 28 September 1984

Reagan's Reflex: Duck, Hide and Lie

Efforts to Evade Responsibility Are Cowardly and Inexcusable

By JODY POWELL

There are no clear rules for those of us who cross the line from government and politics into journalism, but there are responsibilities. One of them is to make known the biases and preconceptions that influence our commentary; and another is to avoid the use of our new positions as a tool for self-justification, a means to propagandize for the people with whom we were associated in earlier days.

In consequence, I have shied away from direct involvement in political arguments concerning the President I once served as press secretary and the current Administration. That policy is about to be broken. And the reader has a right to know that the breach is motivated by a degree of personal outrage and disgust that might or might not exist were it not for past political affiliations.

The proximate cause of all this is President Reagan's attempt to blame the bombing of our embassy in Beirut on Jimmy Carter. But there is a great deal more to it than that. Were this an isolated incident, a chance remark that could be dismissed as a momentary lapse into that very human desire to avoid responsibility for painful mistakes, or if the allegation contained some semblance of truth, the matter would be very different. But these excuses do not apply here.

The charge is patently and demonstrably false. One need look no further than the public statement of President Reagan's own CIA director (and former election campaign chairman) William J. Casey, who disputed the exact same allegation when it was first made by the White House in the aftermath of the attack on the Marine garrison.

Nor is the President's behavior on this occasion in any way atypical. To the contrary, it is part of a continuing pattern that raises questions, not about his policies

or age or intellect, but about his character: Is this man who speaks so eloquently about courage, who cultivates the macho, tough-guy image, a person of true courage; or is he at base a coward?

From virtually his first day in office Reagan has reacted with deeply offended innocence to any implication that he has any responsibility for anything that has gone awry. He has blamed the Congress, previous Administrations, bad staff advice, the Federal Reserve and the press for everything from the recession of 1982, to the deficit, to withdrawal of the Marines from Lebanon, to the sad state of super-power relations. Even his lifelong pattern of irregular church attendance is now laid at the feet of the Secret Service and its cumbersome security procedures.

It is all baloney, but worse than that, it is gutless. His behavior stands in marked contrast to that of his predecessors. One recalls Abraham Lincoln taking personal responsibility for the ineffective Union commanders and prolonged carnage of the Civil War. And Harry S. Truman, who knew where the buck stops and proved it with gutsy and unpopular decisions. And Dwight D. Eisenhower, who knew something about the requirements of command and leadership, accepting responsibility for the U-2 incident. And John F. Kennedy, whom Reagan now quotes shamelessly, accepting full responsibility for the Bay of Pigs.

And I remember the President—the one now being blamed for three tragedies in Beirut—acting without hesitation to accept responsibility for the failed rescue mission in Iran, and threatening to fire any member of his staff who tried to blame those involved with planning or executing that operation. To be accurate, Reagan did seem to accept responsibility for the bombing of the Marine garrison last October, but that

acceptance was shortly followed by his press secretary's attempt to blame it on previous Presidents.

The issue here is not physical bravery but a more fundamental quality, the moral and intellectual courage that compels a man of integrity to face the realities of this world forthrightly, which makes fleeing responsibility as unthinkable and abhorrent as flight from combat. This quality is important, since it is difficult to deal with problems that one is afraid to face.

Nor are the problems with Reagan's behavior confined to his reflexive instinct to duck and hide. His instincts, as we've witnessed so often, are deceitful: He consistently uses obvious falsehoods, that he knows to be false, to excuse himself and blame others.

If there is any excuse for the President's behavior it must be that the temptation is too difficult to resist: He has gotten away with it so well for so long. The responsibility for that falls on the shoulders of Democrats who have often been afraid to attack a popular President head-on, and on journalists who have so frequently dismissed his spiteful alibis with a shrug and the excuse that "it's just the way he is and it doesn't mean anything." The truth is, it does mean something precisely because that's the way he is.

At this writing there is some indication, both among Democrats and within the press, that some of this is about to change. But we have seen such indications before and no follow-up. The test is not just the response to the latest disgusting episode but the handling of similar incidents that are sure to arise as long as Reagan seeks to occupy, but not to fulfill, a position of public responsibility.

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